

My #YALILearns – Training Entrepreneurs and Leaders in Rwanda

Caption: Jean Bosco Nzeyimana at his #YALILearns event on entrepreneurship and  leadership in Rwanda (Courtesy photo)

By Jean Bosco Nzeyimana, 2015 Mandela Washington Fellow

With glittering faces, thirsty for knowledge and filled with diverse expectations, over 50 young people from all corners of Rwanda came to attend a #YALILearns training event that YALI Rwanda fellows hosted in Huye, Rwanda.

When Ange (another Mandela Washington Fellow) and I, on behalf of YALI Rwanda, designed the training, we couldn't agree more that the suitable topic would be "Entrepreneurial Leadership." This is traced far back in a story that the majority of young people across Africa share. Nowadays, we are the first generation of educated people. Many of us have parents who haven't gone to school, and the only thing — yet very important — that we have learned from them is "value." While on the other side of the world a mom is teaching her son how to write computer codes, at home I am teaching my parents basic savings concepts and the reasons we need a farm of vegetables and fruits in our backyard.

Our #YALILearns event took only five days to plan and implement, including promoting the event, signing up participants and holding the training session. We used the [YALI Network Online Courses](#) "Fundamentals of Starting and Running a Business" and "Strategies for Personal Growth and Development." We also focused on exploring ways to meet challenges that we face in our communities through entrepreneurship and leadership. To sustainably meet the underlying challenges in our communities, we need to be both entrepreneurs and leaders. Our goal was to make sure that participants knew how they can solve problems they face in their communities through entrepreneurship. So we made sure they understood the basics. Through this lens, problems become opportunities for business ventures that ultimately lead to job creation and income generation. Applying the principles of leadership makes us remember who we are as young Africans and where we want to take our continent — thanks to the #YALILearns toolkits that we used and guest speakers who shared their journey with the participants.

Through this training, we were able to shed light on a number of topics, ranging from business idea conceptualization to writing a winning business plan. Needless to say, all participants got the opportunity to craft and pitch their ideas, but more importantly, they left inspired and hungry to be agents of change.

With this very experience, we were prompted to plan similar events in other parts of Rwanda. This is something you can do as well by either centering your training around the same topic or finding something that is relevant to your place.

God bless Africa.

Editor's Note: For resources to help you plan and hold your own #YALILearns event, including the

toolkits mentioned above, go to yali.state.gov/learns.

YALI Voices : After being compared to Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg, what's your next career move? [audio]

(Courtesy of Raindolf Owusu)



In 2012, a 22-year-old Ghanaian computer science student named Raindolf Owusu introduced African internet users to the Anansi Browser. It is considered Africa's first web browser and was designed to help users with unreliable internet connections stay connected as well as use games and a web camera that can operate offline.

For his creation, he has been dubbed "[the Mark Zuckerberg of Accra](#)" by Forbes Africa magazine. But as he tells the State Department's Macon Phillips in a YALI Voices podcast, as successful and as celebrated as the browser has been, he lives in a country where many people can't use it because they aren't connected to the internet.

"Building a big web browser ... will give you accolades and everything else, but that's something my mother cannot use or my grandmother in the village cannot use," he said.

As founder and CEO of the software company [Oasis WebSoft](#), Owusu wants to create products that would be more relevant to his community. For example, in Ghana, like other African countries, mobile phones are relatively cheap and nearly everyone has one.

Where is he taking his talent now and what are his future plans as a young leader? Listen to the audio above to find out.

Don't have access to Sound Cloud? Read a transcript of the podcast below:

"YALI Voices Podcast: Raindolf Owusu"

[MUSIC PLAYING]

♪ Yes we can. Sure we can. ♪

♪ Change the World. ♪

MACON PHILLIPS: Welcome Young African Leaders. This is the YALI Voices Podcast – a place to share some of the best stories from the Young African Leaders Initiative Network. My name is Macon Phillips, and I'm really glad you've joined us today. Don't forget to subscribe to this podcast. Just visit YALI.state.gov to stay up to date on all things YALI.

I recently had the chance to sit down with Raindolf Owusu. As the creator of Africa's first web browser, he's already an accomplished software developer and entrepreneur in Ghana. He's the founder and CEO of Oasis WebSoft, a software company, partially focused on creating mobile phone applications to help diagnose and address healthcare issues for Africans.

Raindolf had a lot of really valuable insight on the future of technology in Africa and what it takes to be a modern leader. It's really no wonder he's been called the "Mark Zuckerberg of Africa." So I hope you enjoy this interview as much as I did. We're going to cut now to my conversation with Raindolf Owusu.

Raindolf, it's great to have you here. Thanks for joining us.

RAINDOLF OWUSU: Thank you so much, and great to have you for this interview. Thank you.

MR. PHILLIPS: I know you've had a pretty great career so far. It's still early on in your career.

MR. OWUSU: Yep.

MR. PHILLIPS: But looking forward to hearing a little bit about that, certainly your perspective on technology in Africa –

MR. OWUSU: Yep.

MR. PHILLIPS: – and where you think things are going. But let's try to take it back a little bit. You've made your career in large part on the internet –

MR. OWUSU: Yes.

MR. PHILLIPS: – and sort of doing all of that. What was the first time you ever touched a computer?

MR. OWUSU: Yeah, so my dad got us a computer when I was about 10 years old. He bought it for my older siblings. So we, the younger ones, weren't allowed to touch it. So I have five other siblings. So late at night when they sleep, I just jump on the computer and see what's happening. And one night, I ended up deleting everything on the computer because I needed some space. And I got the beating of my life because at first they didn't know I touched the computer, and now they got to know I deleted everything. So that was pretty much my experience with computers.

MR. PHILLIPS: [LAUGHING] That's not a really auspicious beginning, man.

MR. OWUSU: Yeah. But that got me interested in computers because I realized it was such a big device then, somewhere in 2001 or 2002, and, you know, it did so many different things. I could play games with the computer. I could use Microsoft Word and things like that. And, over time, it gave me a lot to think about.

MR. PHILLIPS: So when you were in secondary school, when you look back on yourself as a student, were you always sort of tracking towards the computer nerd programmer, spending all your free time on that, or was it something that you were aware of but kind of came back to as you developed your own career?

MR. OWUSU: No, it has always been there. I had interest in computers. I remember when I was

about 13-14. I used to be called “the computer man” in the neighborhood because I knew so much about computers, and most of them were self-taught because I’m always on the internet and finding new things. So during secondary school, I was a visual arts student instead of business. I had a lot of interest in business. So I wasn’t so much interested in schoolwork. So I spent most of my time at the internet café.

MR. PHILLIPS: Well, there’s, though, a certain school of thought – I think Steve Jobs from Apple would be probably the most well-known example of this – that the sort of intersection of liberal arts or visual arts and engineering is exactly where you want to be if you are creating consumer products. [CROSSTALK] So maybe as you think about your own career, what, if any, was the influence from that time spent studying visual arts?

MR. OWUSU: Oh, I – even now, I’m happy I did visual arts because now I’m building products – I am building products that I want people to interact with, easy to use. It should be visually appealing because I get to work with colors, I get to work with building software, mobile applications. And all these things have to do with design. So, yeah. They always intersect. Visual arts is a pretty much [INAUDIBLE] technology.

MR. PHILLIPS: So, a lot of people that I talk to have, you know, this interest in entrepreneurship, and they have this interest in starting a business and that sort of thing. And you’re someone who’s done that.

MR. OWUSU: Yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: Successfully, right?

MR. OWUSU: Yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: So let’s start with where you just talked about, your time in school, your visual arts school, and you’re not really going to class as much –

MR. OWUSU: Yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: – because you’re not as engaged.

MR. OWUSU: Yep.

MR. PHILLIPS: How did you go from there to actually taking the plunge to start a business? Walk us through the steps it takes to go from being a student, maybe not even a super motivated student, to an entrepreneur.

MR. OWUSU: Yeah, it’s – I think I had [INAUDIBLE] when I got to the university because I did computer science at Methodist University. So I got to the university and my first day, I enjoyed programming. I was programming and it was very fun. But later on, I realized the schoolwork was becoming so much. And there was a lot happening outside Ghana. So, just like, you hear of a 16-year-old kid who built an app and it’s being purchased by Yahoo for \$13 million. And this is a simple app that I could design.

So, the first thing I did was to start – at first it wasn’t a company in my head. I was just building a

product that I would let people utilize. So I was building products, and later on, over time, I started reading more about this whole technology, and I realized it's actually a business. You have to read more than just technology. You have to actually set up a company. You have to work with people.

So it didn't just happen overnight. I failed a lot actually. My first product became well-known, but to me became a failure. That's called Anansi Web Browser. That is to date being claimed as Africa's first web browser. So I built a web browser because I wanted to show the world Africa could build technology, because anybody who thinks of Africa thinks of an agricultural nation where we are producing oil or we are producing minerals and things like that. But I pretty much wanted to show the world technology is also [CROSSTALK].

MR. PHILLIPS: You wanted to show the world and then you went up and built Africa's first web browser. Why do you think it's a failure?

MR. OWUSU: Pretty much because I didn't customize it for it to be useful in my environment. And that was one learning step I took after building that. So after building the web browser, I decided to build things that would work really well in Africa. So, to me personally, but I believe it gave a lot of people inspiration that if Raindolf also could build a web browser. So personally, I think that is my personal feeling, but overall, looking at me building a web browser in 2011, it was such a big accomplishment, so.

MR. PHILLIPS: So then where did that take you? What did you learn from that in terms of your next step?

MR. OWUSU: So my next step was to look into the market, realize there was a high penetration rate of mobile devices. So everybody had a smartphone because android phones are very cheap. So they had smartphones but they didn't really know it was a smartphone. So I'm like, "Hey, how can we leverage on that and build people the products they want to have?" So we built a product like Bisa, where – Bisa, it means "ask" in Twi. Twi is our local dialect in Ghana. And what we are doing is we are connecting people from home to doctors. So when you have your mobile up and you are a young person and you are seeing some symptoms around your private parts – because we live in a very conservative society, people are scared to go to doctors. So we are giving you a chance to use your phone to take a screenshot and anonymously send it to a doctor and he will get back to you with feedback and let you know you need to see a doctor as soon as possible because this looks like that or you have to do this in order to get rid of that. So we were connecting the public to doctors. And this is very relevant to the community than building a big web browser where it will give you accolade and everything else, but that's something my mother cannot use or my grandmother in the village cannot use.

MR. PHILLIPS: It's so interesting to hear about that use case, because one of the things that I run into when we are talking about the digital aspect of YALI, the online aspect of YALI, is this sense of the digital divide.

MR. OWUSU: Yep.

MR. PHILLIPS: The fact that there isn't internet everywhere here, and in fact, there's not internet in a lot of places at all, and on top of that, there is sort of a digital illiteracy.

MR. OWUSU: Yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: But it would seem to me that this product that you are rolling out, which is trying to extend health care to at-risk, disconnected regions would almost by definition be targeted at people who –

MR. OWUSU: Yep.

MR. PHILLIPS: – aren't familiar with the internet, aren't necessarily connected with the internet.

MR. OWUSU: Yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: So, how do you square that circle? How do you reconcile the fact that you're in a region where connectivity is tough, and sometimes using computers or smartphones or connected devices can be a little bit difficult with this need to make sure that these services are utilized?

MR. OWUSU: Yeah, so I always attribute the kind of work I do to the fact that I'm actually on ground zero. I'm where everything is happening. So when I'm rolling out a technology like Bisa, I have to think about every part of Ghana. I don't just need to think about Accra. Accra is just a small piece of the whole Ghana. So there's somebody who is in Sirigu in maybe the northern region where the only time he or she gets close to technology is the radio or maybe a Nokia [INAUDIBLE] that does not have app features or anything. So when we are building a product, we build high-end for people like myself, who have been to school, literate people. And we build something using like an IVR, an Interactive Voice Response, where – with any mobile device. It doesn't have to be smart. You just dial a short code and someone will talk to you in a local language, a response system.

So, we are building technology for high-end people, and we build a stripped-down version for people without access to that IT infrastructure. And we get to do that because here on the ground, we know how things like this work in different parts of the country.

MR. PHILLIPS: And so, as someone who's studying this closely and has a business that really depends on it, give me the forecast to where you think Ghana is going in terms of technology, and to the extent you can, Africa generally. As we think about our own efforts, our nonprofits we want to start, our businesses we want to start, how is technology changing Africa?

MR. OWUSU: Yeah, that's a good question. I think technology at first was something most people were scared about, if you read the history of technology in Africa, where people had big computers in their offices and they never used it. But now we've seen a change, and mobile phones have led that revolution. At one point, we had so many mobile phones in Africa than even telephone devices in the U.S. or something, right? And that stems to how mobile phones revolutionized this bit.

And one thing people are getting to understand in all sectors in business in maybe Ghana is technology is a backbone. Healthcare needs technology. Entertainment needs technology – even education. So I think in the next five years, you'd see distance learning or e-learning taking shape in schools. And once that this becomes a norm, it will be something everybody would have to accept in any industry, whether agriculture, because now we have small farmers that are using SMSs to receive weather forecasts. So technology is actually taking shape step by step, but then it will take a while and a lot of education.

So in Ghana perspective, I think the next five years would see a lot of innovations. Some of us are spearheading it in healthcare. I want to see other people doing it in agriculture, people doing it in education, and so on and so forth.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yeah. That's interesting though because I haven't heard someone answer it with the sort of first point, and I think I agree, perhaps the most fundamental point being its impact on education.

MR. OWUSU: Yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: Because, you know, all these other things build on having a literate, knowledgeable workforce. When we talk about civic engagement, people have to understand the world. When we talk about new economies, people have to have these skills. And when you think about the current state of education systems in a lot of countries in Africa, it's not good, the idea that you could actually bring in these online courses and bring in tech-driven curricula could have a profound impact on where things are heading. So it's a really interesting point you make.

MR. OWUSU: Yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: So where are you heading? What's your next business? You know, you've already started some successful businesses, and it seems like the latest one is doing really great work around healthcare.

MR. OWUSU: Yep.

MR. PHILLIPS: What do you daydream about? What do you want to work on moving forward?

MR. OWUSU: Oh, so I think I've fallen in love with the healthcare sector, and – because besides getting very popular, it's becoming very impactful in Ghana. I'm looking at ways to enter into other markets, other West African markets like Côte d'Ivoire, where Bisa will not only support Ghanaian languages, but will also support French and maybe expand to other African countries.

So the next focus – and a few days ago, we had a small forum with my team where we are discussing how we can move the technology into other areas of the whole healthcare system, you know, because recordkeeping is very important. But we don't take it seriously in this part of the world, where you go to a hospital and you are given your folder to take home. That is very terrible; you can just lose the folder. You know, we need like a digital cloud system that can house all your information, so no matter who the doctor is, once you come to his room, he looks at your ID, he can just pull up your healthcare information. And it will help for them to continuously understand your ailment or anything else.

MR. PHILLIPS: A few other questions I have for you. You mentioned earlier that you were at a forum for your team.

MR. OWUSU: Yep.

MR. PHILLIPS: And I'm curious. As someone who's gone from being, it sounds like, the younger kid in the family, right?

MR. OWUSU: Yep. [LAUGHING] Yeah, I'm the youngest male, yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: Of how many?

MR. OWUSU: I have two other brothers and three other sisters.

MR. PHILLIPS: Alright, three other sisters?

MR. OWUSU: Yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: Oh my goodness. You're well-loved growing up, I'm sure, right?

MR. OWUSU: [LAUGHING]

MR. PHILLIPS: So, you're one of the young kids in the family, and now you're running an organization.

MR. OWUSU: Yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: What have you learned along the way about management and about leadership? I mean, what do you think has made you effective at leading other people?

MR. OWUSU: Yeah, I think it's because I don't see myself as a leader in the team, but as a team player. And I'm going to explain that. Because I'm a trained software engineer. If I come up with a project and we are working on it, I actually need a software development team. So I get to write the code with them. So when you are working with a team and they know they are part of the process, they don't really feel left out.

So that has attributed to the success of our project, you know, because I don't become your typical leader where I tell you to do this or do that, but I actually work with you, so if you have any problem, you can easily walk up to - and even my office is an open office, so you can easily walk up to my table and say, "Hey, I'm having problems with this code," or "I'm trying to market this to this client and I'm not getting it." So I think being a team player is very important. And the fact that I continuously mentor them. Any time they have any challenge, they easily walk up to me and I'm open to listening and offer my advice. And I even tell them to explore, you know, other avenues of solving problems. You know, it's not just your work at the office, but then, hey, we live in a very diverse society. So if there are problems you see, you can bring it on board and let's see how best we can all work together. So I think being a team player has actually contributed to my success as a leader.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Are there things you do every day or routines you do every week that you feel like have made you a more effective leader or more effective person in terms of your goals?

MR. OWUSU: I think reading. I read 30 minutes every day, whether it is news articles or a book. And I like to read things outside what I'm doing. So you won't find me reading a book about technology. You'd find me reading a book about a politician or a religion or something.

MR. PHILLIPS: What's on your Kindle or on your bookshelf these days? What would you recommend to people?

MR. OWUSU: I think *How to Influence People*. It's an interesting book. And I read a lot of autobiographies. So these days I'm reading about Kenneth Kaunda. He used to be the President of [INAUDIBLE] – Zambia. I read a lot of autobiographies.

MR. PHILLIPS: And what would you say – if you had to sum up your reading so far on him – has been the sort of takeaway?

MR. OWUSU: I think he had to make hard choices and he was – you know, religion in Africa is very big, so he was juggling between how to become a Christian and how to make hard choices when it came to dealing with rebels and things like that. Should he arm the soldiers to go and fight the rebels? Or he should be relaxed for the rebels to take over certain regions? So, yeah, I think – [LAUGHING].

MR. PHILLIPS: Hard choices.

MR. OWUSU: Yeah, hard choices. And being a leader is all about making hard choices, so you should always be ready for that.

MR. PHILLIPS: So, the last one is more turning the tables because we've been asking you a lot of questions. If you could ask Barack Obama a question, what would you want to know?

MR. OWUSU: Ahh [LAUGHING] If Obama is sitting – President Barack Obama is sitting here, I want to know what's next after the Presidency and if he would be more involved in issues in Africa. So I would want to know what his plan for Africa would be after 2016.

MR. PHILLIPS: I don't know the answer to that, but my hunch is it will involve something having to do with Africa. I was speaking earlier about this. I got a different question and what is very clear to me is that Africa is very much in the President's heart and so are young leaders.

So, for everyone out there on the YALI Network listening to this, I think there's – it's hard to imagine a future where Barack Obama is not somehow involved with these issues and on this continent. So, the future is bright, not least of which because of the young leaders who are tuning in right now. And we want to thank all of you for joining us today on the YALI Podcast. Raindolf, I've really enjoyed our conversation.

MR. OWUSU: Thank you, Macon.

MR. PHILLIPS: Thanks for making time.

MR. OWUSU: You're welcome.

MR. PHILLIPS: Have a great day.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

MR. PHILLIPS: What's really great about Raindolf is how committed he is to mentoring. He sees the value in sharing ideas and moving everyone forward. I also love how he practices the idea of failing forward. It's the notion that even when things don't work out for you, you can still learn from the experience and immediately apply those lessons to your next project.


So I want to thank Raindolf for sitting down and sharing his story with us. If you'd like to get more info about Raindolf, check out OasisWebSoft.com where you can connect with him and get more information on his projects.

Thanks so much for listening and make sure to subscribe so you don't miss any of the upcoming interviews with other young African leaders. Join the YALI Network at YALI.state.gov and be part of something bigger.

Our theme music is "E Go Happen" by Grace Jerry, produced by the Presidential Precinct. The YALI Voices Podcast is brought to you by the U.S. Department of State, and is part of the Young African Leaders Initiative, which is funded by the U.S. government.

Thanks everyone.

Location Is Vital for a New Business

Mandela Washington Fellow Hetiarivony  Rabetsimamanga of Madagascar teaches young entrepreneurs marketing, which includes determining where to locate a business like this hat stall.
Credit: Hetiarivony Rabetsimamanga

Choosing a business location is one of the most important decisions a startup will make. The choice requires solid research and precise planning. Before deciding on a location, talk to building co-tenants or other business owners in the area.

And consider these other location factors:

1. **Exposure:** Choose a location that provides ample exposure to your customers.
2. **Image:** Is the location consistent with the image you want to maintain?
3. **Competition:** Are the businesses around you complementary or competing? Which areas are your competitors ignoring?
4. **Local labor market:** Does the area have potential employees with the skills you need or the ability to be trained?
5. **Your plans for growth:** If you anticipate the business will grow, look for a building that has the space you may need.
6. **Proximity to suppliers:** They need to be able to deliver your supplies.

7. **Safety:** Will customers — or employees — feel safe in the building or traveling between their homes and your business?
8. **Laws and regulations:** Local authorities may have rules about what kind of business can operate in specific locations.

You also need to consider financial variables that could affect your business:

1. **Hidden costs:** Very few spaces are business-ready. Include costs like renovation, decorating, information technology system upgrades, etc.
2. **Taxes:** What are the tax rates for your area? Could you pay less in taxes by locating your business in a nearby area?
3. **Wages:** What is the prevailing fair wage rate in your area? You will get the best employees if you offer fair wages.
4. **Government incentives:** Your business type or location can determine whether you qualify for a government business incentive program.

Always consult with a small business specialist or counselor familiar with local circumstances to help you answer any questions you may have about where to launch your business before you make any final decisions.

During the month of November, the YALI Network will focus on the topic of entrepreneurship, in recognition of the [Global Entrepreneurship Summit](#) to be held in Morocco November 19-21.

Adapted from material published by the [U.S. Small Business Administration](#).
